Nutritional knowledge and eating attitudes and habits in higher education

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ABSTRACT

Eating habits involve behavioural predispositions related to intra and interpersonal factors, which include nutritional knowledge and attitudes towards the consumption of certain types of food. This study includes a systematic review of studies on knowledge, attitudes and eating habits of college students, which included declared criteria of eligibility. In general, to measure eating habits, it is proposed that questions be asked regarding the daily frequency of consumption of fruits, vegetables, fast foods and foods with sugar. Scales of attitudes towards food should include items about the ability to understand nutritional recommendations and food labels. The scales of knowledge about food, it is proposed the use of items related to the presence of nutrients in certain foods. The current review, 1) provides guidelines for the construction of standardized measurement scales related to knowledge, attitudes and eating habits. And, 2) the main results presented can help in the elaboration of programs of education and promotion of healthy eating in the university.
Keywords: Eating habits; Higher education; Nutritional knowledge; Eating attitudes.

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INTRODUCTION

Health and disease prevention is strongly related to food selection (WHO, 2017), and excessive consumption of saturated fat is associated with increased cholesterol and a higher risk of cardiovascular diseases. Eating habits involve behavioural predispositions related to intra and interpersonal factors, which include nutritional knowledge and attitudes towards the consumption of certain types of food. The present systematic review aims to identify, retrieve and analyse the instruments of knowledge, attitudes and eating habits of students of Higher Education.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

To ensure transparency and integrity of literature proceeded in accordance with the guidelines of PRISMA (Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff, & Altman, 2010). From the research in five databases (PubMed, ERIC, CINAHL®, SciELO and ScienceDirect) of articles published in scientific journals, between 1980 and 2018, four terms are combined using Boolean operators. After carrying out literature searches, 10 articles were selected from a total of 172 studies found. It excluded a) studies on populations not only of higher education or samples of populations in specific situations; b) articles related to eating habits or attitudes and health problems or including the association with other risk behaviours; c) literature review articles or interventions; and, d) which did not present the psychometric measures of the instruments.

RESULTS

The selected articles were published between 2007 (Kolodinsky, Harvey-Berino, Berlin, Johnson, & Reynolds, 2007) and 2018 (Silva, Campos, & Marôco, 2018). The analysis of the food habits assessment instruments allowed us to conclude that it is essential to evaluate the eating frequency of the following foods: fats or fast foods (Blotnicky, Mann, & Joy, 2015; Kolodinsky et al., 2007; Kresić, Kendel Jovanović, Pavicić Zezelj, Cvijanović, & Ivezić, 2009; Ozdoğan & Ozcelik, 2011; White, Horwath, & Conner, 2013); sugars or sweets (Blotnicky et al., 2015; Kolodinsky et al., 2007; Kresić et al., 2009; Ozdoğan & Ozcelik, 2011; White et al., 2013); vegetables (Blotnicky et al., 2015; Kolodinsky et al., 2007; Kresić et al., 2009; White et al., 2013); and fruits (Kolodinsky et al., 2007; Kresić et al., 2009; White et al., 2013). The variables weight and height for the calculation of body mass index proved to be an important variable (Fyler, Schumacher, Banning, & Gam, 2014; Hamilton et al., 2018; Ohara et al., 2014; Poínhos, Oliveira, & Correia, 2015; Silva et al., 2018). The nutritional knowledge addressed by several studies is directed towards the understanding of nutrients in foods (Kolodinsky et al., 2007; Kresić et al., 2009) .(Kresić et al., 2009; Ozdoğan & Ozcelik, 2011) and food recommendations (Kolodinsky et al., 2007; Kresić et al., 2009). Self-efficacy was a major factor in the analysis of positive attitudes toward healthy eating (Blotnicky et al., 2015; Fyler et al., 2014; Poínhos et al., 2015).

DISCUSSION

To measure eating habits, it is proposed that questions be asked regarding the daily frequency of consumption of fruits, vegetables, fast foods and food with sugar. Scales of attitudes towards food should include items about the ability to understand nutritional recommendations and food labels. For the food knowledge scale, the use of items related to the presence of nutrients in certain foods is proposed.

CONCLUSIONS

The current review provides guidelines for the construction of standardized and comparable measurement scales. At the same time, it reinforces the idea of the need to develop intervention programs to promote healthy eating in higher education, so that university students have the opportunity to make informed decisions about the foods to be consumed, to develop more positive attitudes towards healthy eating and, therefore, to opt for a balanced diet.

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